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Artisanal Firearm Production in West Africa

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Front cover photo

A craft weapon workshop in Bamako, Mali, March 2023. Source: Small Arms Survey



Overview

The sources of illicit small arms in West Africa are multiple and evolving, and not limited to the diversion of international transfers. In terms of local sources, the unlicensed artisanal production of firearms has been a recurrent challenge for member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). To support governments in addressing this challenge, the Survey conducted a general assessment of artisanal arms production in the ECOWAS region and the main regulatory approaches adopted by states to address their proliferation. This paper aims to stimulate discussion and the exchange of information on good practices among stakeholders to counter the proliferation and illicit use of small arms in West Africa.

Key findings

- Craft firearm production has deep cultural and economic roots in West Africa and serves different societal needs—and different uses—than industrial firearm production. Demand for craft-produced weapons is dependent on local dynamics.
- Craft firearms are no longer exclusively rudimentary items. In some instances, their sophistication is comparable to industrially made weapons equipped with automatic and semi-automatic mechanisms.
- The current regulatory framework for firearm production in West Africa, mandated by the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials, does not distinguish between industrial and craft production, contributing to poor enforcement by the authorities, as well as low awareness and regulation avoidance among craft producers. In addition, the legal provisions often fail to take into account the firing mechanism, which is essential for determining a firearm's lethality and type of use.
- Despite the unclear regulatory environment, artisanal producers in West Africa have shown a willingness to professionalize and regularize their work. If national authorities can refine legislative frameworks to reflect actual craft production practices and products, this willingness could serve as a basis for improved cooperation, record-keeping, and marking practices.

Introduction

The production and use of craft weapons is increasingly recognized as a major challenge to the prevention of the illicit arms trade.¹ While there is no universally agreed definition of artisanal firearms or ammunition, it is commonly understood to refer to weapons and ammunition fabricated largely by hand in relatively small quantities (Berman, 2011, p. 1). They have also been characterized as 'locally made' or 'country-made' weapons, or as 'expedient weapons' to highlight that they are generally—but not always—simple designs, easily constructed, and made of readily available materials (Hays and Jenzen-Jones, 2018, p. 18). Moreover, 'craft weapons may be produced for personal, traditional, or organizational use, or for sale' (Hays and Jenzen-Jones, 2018, p. 18). Another important aspect of craft firearms is that they are generally produced outside of state control and provide a source of supply not only for armed groups and criminals, but also for hunters and individuals seeking to protect themselves (Dungel and Nowak, 2020). Along with illicit trafficking, the ECOWAS Convention targets illicit manufacturing as a threat to 'human security, international humanitarian law, sustainable development, and human rights' (ECOWAS, 2006, p. 2).

The trade of gunsmithing—which predates the modern arms industry (Hays and Jenzen-Jones, 2018, p. 14)—is deeply anchored in the cultural heritage of West African societies. Communities depend on artisanal firearms for hunting, protection, or ceremonial purposes, or use them as symbols of social status.² Meanwhile, their production has evolved in line with security developments. The expansion of jihadist groups in West Africa over the last decade has prompted civilians and self-defence militias to procure arms to protect themselves (Wisotzki, 2022, p. 254). At the same time, the ease of access to and affordability (relative to industrially produced arms) of craft weapons has made them particularly attractive possessions (Florquin, Lipott, and Wairagu, 2019, p. 57).³ In places where these weapons constitute a principal source of supply, evolving security contexts have had a direct impact on the demand for artisanal weapons. Meanwhile, gunsmiths who acquired better quality material and refined their production techniques over time are now able to produce highly sophisticated weapons, which sometimes

closely resemble factory-made firearms. Today, craft weapons in the region range from rudimentary hunting weapons to sophisticated copies of self-loading rifles (Assanvo, 2017; Nowak and Gsell, 2018, p. 3).

In light of this, craft firearms can offer criminals, insurgent groups, and private citizens a viable alternative to industrial weapons (Hays and Jenzen-Jones, 2018, p. 36). Due to the clandestine—and lucrative—nature of their production, however, regulating the sector presents considerable challenges. Although the ECOWAS Convention provides a basis for the control of local firearm production in West Africa, it does not determine whether the manufacture of craft firearms should be considered separately or together with the manufacture of industrial weapons. In practice, most national legislation suggests that legal provisions relating to licensing, marking, and record-keeping apply to all manufacturers indiscriminately. Nevertheless, due to technical and financial limitations, craft producers often fail to comply with these provisions, and may be pushed further into the covert side of the arms trade. With a view to informing artisanal firearms control policy, this Briefing Paper provides an overview of craft production dynamics in West Africa and explores the different approaches taken by ECOWAS member states to regulate their production.

Methodology

To assess the approaches to craft production in West Africa, the study employed a mixed methodology based primarily on qualitative data collection, along with quantitative data when available. Following a desk review conducted between September 2021 and February 2022, the Small Arms Survey approached all 15 National Commissions on Small Arms and Light Weapons (NATCOMs), or national focal points (NFPs), in West Africa to inquire about the production of craft firearms and the application of relevant regulatory frameworks. The data was predominantly collected between March and May 2022, and supplemented by the contributions of two NATCOMs (Gambia and Liberia) in February 2023. Ultimately, ten NATCOMs or NFPs took part in the study, with four completing a questionnaire (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone) and

seven participating in interviews (Benin, Gambia, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo).⁴ A series of consultations with experts, international organizations, international NGOs, and civil society organizations was also undertaken in parallel between April 2022 and March 2023. To provide an overview of the main regulatory approaches employed by member states, the authors conducted an analysis of selected legislative frameworks. The legislation considered for the purposes of this analysis includes laws and decrees in effect as of March 2023 (a complete list of the regulations reviewed can be found in Annexe 1). The Small Arms Survey also partnered with the Sierra Leone Action Network on Small Arms (SLANSA) to provide deeper insights into the experiences of this country. Between March and May 2022, SLANSA interviewed 24 stakeholders involved in arms control from government and civil society, and conducted focus group discussions with a total of 35 craft manufacturers in five different regions of Sierra Leone.

Artisanal production in West Africa

Artisanal firearms⁵ are often made illegally in homes or in clandestine workshops, but their production can also be a legitimate activity in states with a robust licensing system in place.

While acknowledging the existence of both the legal and illegal production of artisanal firearms, this paper sought to shed light on clandestine production in particular, as well as the obstacles that unlicensed gunsmiths face in regularizing their activity as prescribed by the ECOWAS Convention:

Each Member State shall regulate the activities of local small arms and light weapons manufacturers and shall undertake to adopt strategies and policies to the reduction and/or limitation of the manufacture of small arms and light weapons so as to control the local manufacture as well as their marketing in ECOWAS region (ECOWAS, 2006, art. 7(2)).

Craft firearms in West Africa comprise both handguns and long guns, such as 8 mm and 12 mm pistols, as well as assault rifles and 12-gauge shotguns (in some cases double-barrelled). Common types of small arms and operating (firing) systems include break-action, flintlock, and (muzzle-loading) percussion lock weapons (see Images 1, 2, 3, 7 and 8, and Figures 1 and 2). In countries with skilled gunsmiths, weapons can feature pump-actions, revolving loading mechanisms, and automatic and semi-automatic mechanisms (see Images 4, 5 and 6). To produce these firearms, gunsmiths generally rely on local sources of materials. For example, they may use scrap metals

Image 1 Artisanal pistol from Mali, 2022



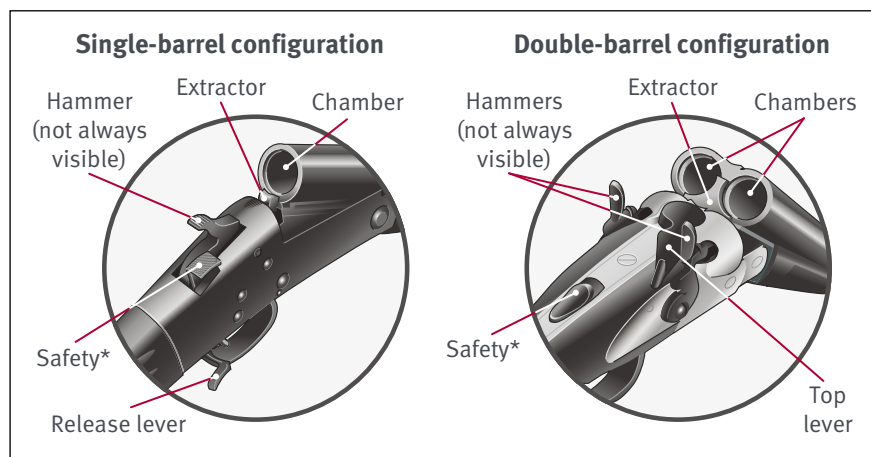
Source: David Lochhead

Image 2 Artisanal hunting rifle from Mali, 2022



Source: David Lochhead

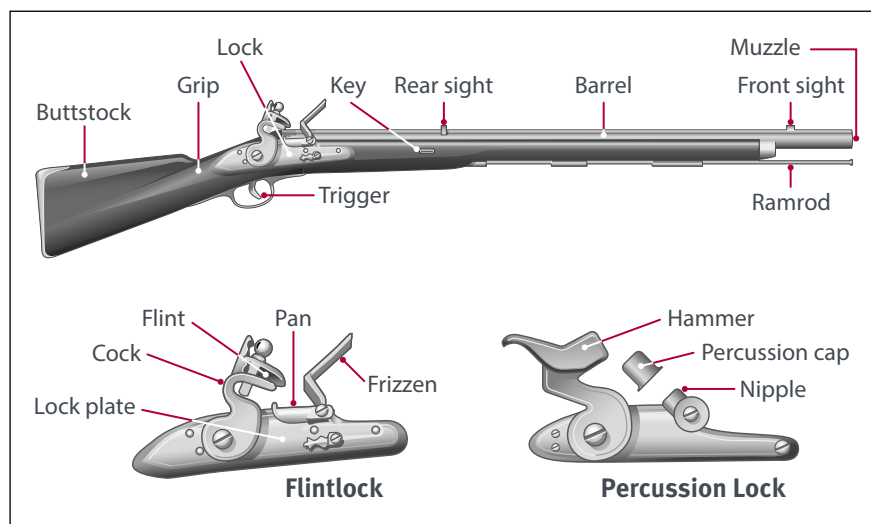
Figure 1 Break-action shotguns featuring a single-barrel design (left) and a double-barrel design (right)



Note: * Not always present. Could also be placed in the trigger guard.

Source: Nowak and Gsell (2018); Jenzen-Jones (2022)

Figure 2 Common parts and operating systems for muzzle-loading firearms



Source: Jenzen-Jones (2022)

Image 3 Artisanal weapon with a side-by-side double-barrel configuration, Nigeria, 2017



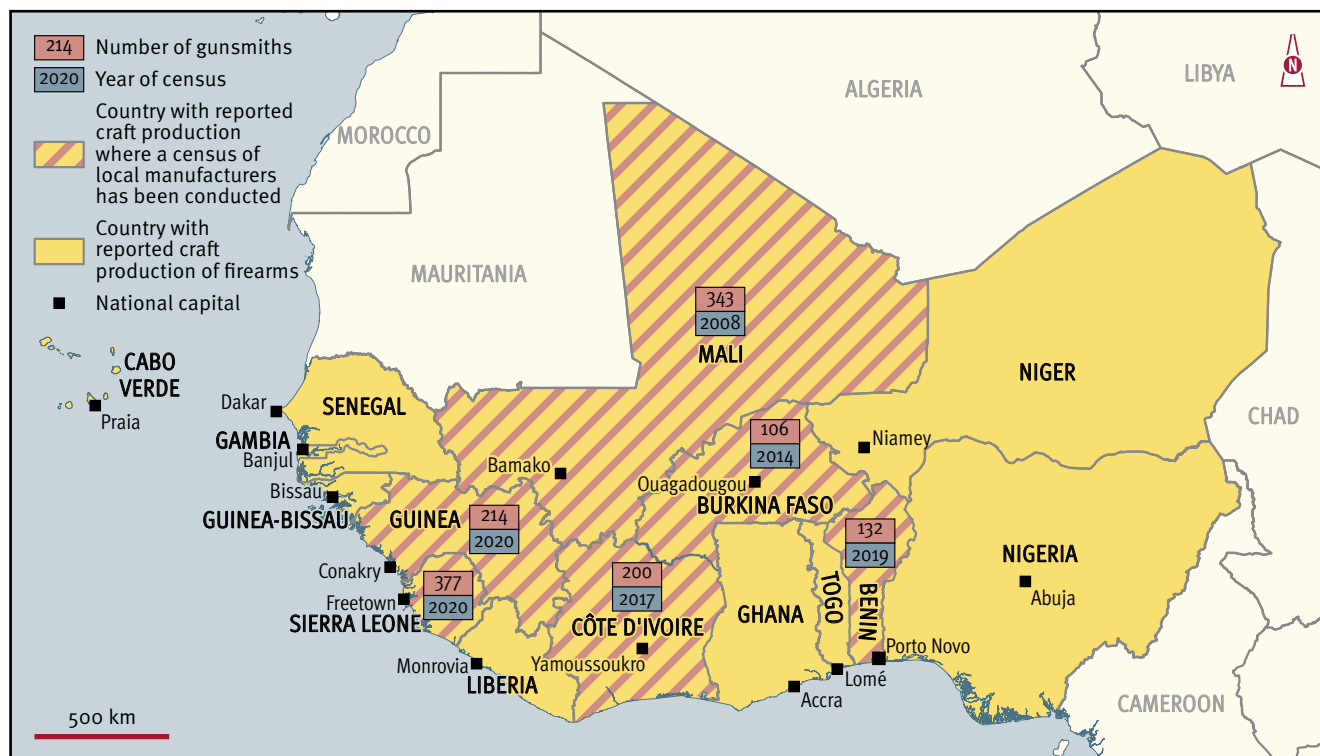
Source: Small Arms Survey

and steel water pipes to make smooth-bore barrels (Hays and Jenzen-Jones, 2018, p. 29).⁶ As noted in the section on normative frameworks for craft firearm production, the operating system is rarely used as a basis for the classification of small arms in legislation, despite being one of the best indicators of their level of lethality.

Firearms with a certain level of technical sophistication require advanced knowledge of manufacturing techniques. The literature review and consultations with stakeholders confirm that skilled gunsmiths—most notably in Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria—are capable of producing semi-automatic or automatic weapons (Mali Act, 2023; McCaskie, 2008, p. 435; Nowak and Gsell, 2018, p. 3).⁷ Some of these weapons closely resemble their factory-made counterparts (see Images 4 and 5). As early as 2008, researchers in Ghana reported the presence of locally made copies of AK-pattern assault rifles—referred to as ‘washman’—capable of single-shot or automatic fire (with a standard 30-round magazine) (McCaskie, 2008, p. 435). McCaskie notes that ‘Ghana’s most-skilled and best-equipped gunsmiths [. . .] have turned to manufacturing and selling copies of Russian, Chinese, North Korean, Libyan and Serbian versions of the world-renowned Soviet AK-47 automatic assault rifles’ (2008, p. 435). In Nigeria, field research conducted by the Small Arms Survey in 2018 identified various artisanal sub-machine guns and assault rifles with semi-automatic or automatic systems (Nowak and Gsell, 2018, p. 5). In Mali, copies of handmade semi-automatic pistols are common and their seizure regularly reported on by local media (Mali Act, 2022; 2023; Malijet, 2019). Due to the proliferation of these pistols, the government explicitly prohibited them from being manufactured, sold, or carried under the new law on firearms and ammunition in 2021 (Mali, 2021, art. 5). According to the Mali NATCOM, advanced production methods and materials have led to a more sophisticated trade, greater efficiency, and an increase in the overall production of craft firearms.⁸

Craft firearm users tend to rely on ammunition that is readily available in their surroundings, such as 12- or 14-gauge shotgun ammunition.⁹ While the sources of this ammunition are numerous, a non-negligible illicit trade of cartridges originating from the Cartoucherie du Mali

Map 1 Documenting craft production in the ECOWAS region



Note: The Sierra Leone estimate makes a distinction between manufacturers (138) and repairers (239).

Sources: **Benin** (Asoba and Glokpor, 2014, p. 74; Benin, 2020; 2022); **Burkina Faso** (Burkina Faso, 2022, p. 2; GRIP and Small Arms Survey, 2016, p. 21); **Cape Verde** (Mack, 2017, p. 7; Pereira, 2017); **Côte d'Ivoire** (Berghezan, 2014, p. 17; Côte d'Ivoire, 2017, p. 6; Wisler, 2021); **Gambia** (Small Arms Survey, 2023, p. 8; Mangan and Nowak, 2019, p. 8); **Ghana** (Akakpo, 2017; Pokoo, Aning, and Jaye, 2014, p. 35); **Guinea** (Friaguinée, 2020; Guinea, 2010, p. 13); **Guinea-Bissau** (Mack, 2017, p. 7; Mangan and Nowak, 2019, p. 8); **Liberia** (Small Arms Survey, 2023, p. 8); **Mali** (UNREC, n.d., p. 8; Kornio, 2011, p. 13; UNREC and UNDP, 2016a); **Niger** (UNREC and UNDP, 2016b, p. 7; de Tessières, 2018, p. 44); **Nigeria** (CAR, 2020, p. 12; Nigeria, 2018, p. 4; Nowak and Gsell, 2018); **Senegal** (Senegal, 2018, p. 5; UNREC and UNDP, 2016c, p. 7); **Sierra Leone** (NRCS, 2021, p. 4; SLANSA, 2017; 2019); **Togo** (Asoba and Glokpor, 2014, p. 56; Togo, 2014).

Base map data source: OpenStreetMap

(CARMA) has been found to feed various black markets in the region (Wisler, 2021, p. 89). Although the majority of ECOWAS states have criminalized the illicit manufacturing of ammunition—for example in Liberia and Mali (Liberia, 2016, para. 1.65; Mali, 2021, art. 10)—the practice of recycling fired ammunition and using readily available materials to make projectiles is not uncommon (Wisler, 2021, p. 84). While this type of production is generally limited due to the relative ease of access to industrial ammunition in the region and the labour-intensive nature of refilling fired ammunition, some gunsmiths specialize in the manufacture of ammunition. Certain producers, for example, fill old shell cases (9 mm and 7.62 × 39 mm casings) with a mixture of black powder and recycled gunpowder. The primer—which needs to be replaced if the fired ammunition is to be used again—is reportedly acquired separately from a factory that either produces or imports it (it is usually obtained on the black market unless the producer is authorized to purchase the component). This type of production is not without

Images 4 and 5 Semi-automatic pistol produced in 2023 in Mali



Source: Confidential source

Image 6 Artisanal shotgun capable of discharging several shots successively, Nigeria, 2017



Source: Small Arms Survey

risks, however, and may lead to misfires that cause injuries to the user.¹⁰ Like craft firearm production, the process of producing and recycling ammunition is not well documented and would benefit from additional research.

In many West African countries, the production of craft firearms is an ancestral activity, with skills and knowledge passed on from generation to generation within families of blacksmiths,¹¹ predominantly between men.¹² According to a producer in Mali, in the past, women were sometimes given less labour-intensive tasks in a blacksmith's workshop (such as the manipulation of the forge blower) due to fewer personnel.¹³ Blacksmiths in Mali are associated with a hereditary 'guild'. As one Malian craft producer put it: 'We are born blacksmiths and will die blacksmiths.'¹⁴ In Côte d'Ivoire, where blacksmiths also hold a sacred role in society, the most established families of blacksmiths supplied firearms to their kings centuries ago to equip their armies (Côte d'Ivoire, 2017, p. 8). While many gunsmiths learned the trade through family members, in Sierra Leone, the expanding demand for small arms led to the expansion of institutions that provide vocational and technical skill training (SLANSA, 2017, p. 4). According to an exchange with SLANSA in August 2022, vocational training institutions encourage the pursuit of a more technical education for students who cannot go to senior secondary school.

Gun making may be a full-time profession for producers working in environments where demand is high, or supplement other income-generating activities such as blacksmithing, agriculture, animal husbandry, or hunting. Many gunsmiths come from families of blacksmiths and therefore produce household and agricultural tools such as cutlery, hangers, or ploughs to supplement their income (Aning, 2005, p. 85; Berghezan, 2014, p. 11). More senior and skilled gunsmiths may choose to work alone, but many others work with apprentices who specialize in different areas of the production process.¹⁵

In Sierra Leone, seventy per cent of gunsmiths and blacksmiths who attended the focus group discussions as part of this study (35 of 50 participants) reported being illiterate. Their overall levels of education varied, with some having completed secondary school and others only primary school. Although various sources of training were reported—

including local apprenticeships and technical and vocational institutes—knowledge and skills pertaining to the manufacture of craft weapons appear to be acquired mainly from family members.

Artisanal firearms produced without a licence are not typically marked with identifying information such as a serial number and year of production, but their producers may still be identifiable. A study by the Côte d'Ivoire NATCOM, for example, found that a producer's identity can be traced back to its production methods (Côte d'Ivoire, 2017, p. 17). In West Africa, the craftsmanship of a weapon forms part of the gunsmith's wider identity and 'brand'. By marking their products with a symbol (such as letters or a stamp), they may seek to promote themselves, draw attention to their skills, or attempt to leave the informal sphere (Côte d'Ivoire, 2017, p. 17).

While the level of craft production varies greatly in the ECOWAS region, past research demonstrates that it is a relevant issue, to at least some degree, for all 15 member states (see Map 1). Yet the region lacks systematic and reliable statistics that would allow member states to tackle the problem of illicit craft production in a coordinated manner. The ECOWAS Convention requires its member states to conduct a census of local manufacturers prior to their registration in national arms registers (ECOWAS, 2006, art. 7); however, only a handful of countries—Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, and Sierra Leone—appear to have conducted baseline assessments. The reported number of producers varies greatly, from 106 in Burkina Faso (2014) to 343 in Mali (2008) (Burkina Faso, 2022, p. 2; Kornio, 2011, p. 13). In Sierra Leone, the survey distinguishes between local manufacturers (138) and repairers (239) (NRCS, 2021, p. 4). It is important to note that most of these surveys do not clearly specify the methodology used to both count and define arms producers. As a result, detailed comparative analyses cannot be undertaken.

Craft firearm proliferation

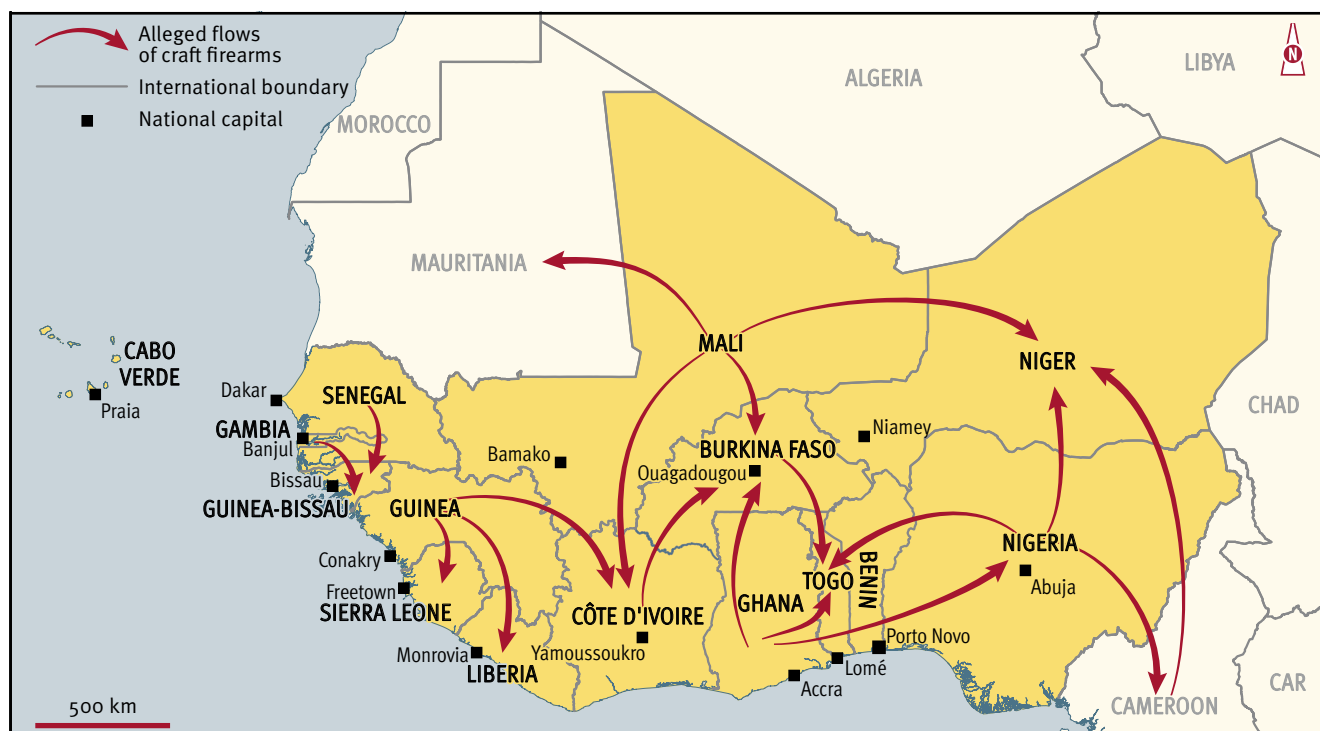
Since the outbreak of civil wars in the 1990s on the African continent, states and regional organisations have developed various initiatives to combat the illicit arms trade and promote peace. These include the 1998 Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and

Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons in West Africa (ECOWAS, 1998); the subsequent ECOWAS Convention (2006); the establishment of NATCOMs; or, most recently, the 'Silencing the Guns in Africa' initiative led by the African Union. Despite these efforts, the number of arms in circulation and firearm-related deaths in the West African region remains high. The Small Arms Survey estimated that at least 40 million firearms in Africa are held by civilians, among a population of some 1.25 billion people (3.2 firearms per 100 population).¹⁶ Of these firearms, 5,841,200 are recorded as officially registered (the others are either unregistered or their status is unknown). In parallel, 10,972,000 of the 40 million civilian-held firearms in Africa are spread across West Africa (2.9 firearms per 100 population) (Florquin, Lipott, and Wairagu, 2019, p. 31).¹⁷ Yet these numbers tell us very little about the type of firearms possessed, how they are produced and how they circulate.

The challenges of controlling artisanal firearm production and trafficking are similar, although not identical, to those encountered in the illicit trade of industrial weapons. These include structural issues such as governance failure (human insecurity due to the low provision of state security), porous borders, and high corruption levels (Malam, 2013). Similarly, although the cultural significance of craft firearms has reportedly endured, the supply of, and demand for, both craft and industrial weapons tend to evolve according to socio-economic and security contexts across the continent, but probably in different ways that remain largely unexplored on the artisanal side.

Indeed, craft production represents an unknown proportion of the overall distribution of firearms and empirical research on international trafficking of craft-produced firearms remains scarce. Information collected during this study suggests that some cross-border trafficking occurs in the region (see Map 2). Not surprisingly, however, the exact routes and methods of artisanal firearms trafficked in the region are not well documented.¹⁸ This is partly because artisanal weapons are 'often made to order, sold individually or in such small quantities as to make drawing meaningful, generalised conclusions about how they end up involved in illicit activities or in the hands of unauthorised individuals next to impossible' (Gramizzi, 2022, p. 10).

Map 2 Alleged trafficking flows of craft firearms within West Africa



Note: This map is for indicative purpose only. It is based on a compilation of states responses to survey questionnaire, interviews, and open source reports compiled in Small Arms Survey (2023). Source: Small Arms Survey (2023). Base map data source: OpenStreetMap.

Demand for craft production

In West Africa, craft production of firearms is driven by a range of factors, including subsistence hunting; cultural and ritual activities involving firearms; protection (cattle, crop, or self-protection); and criminal activities (theft, robberies, poaching, or armed conflict). Patriarchal gender roles also contribute to demand for small arms. In most societies, ‘the possession, use, and misuse of small arms are closely linked with specific expressions of masculinity in society’ (UNODA, 2022, p. 61). For example, in many West African countries, such as Niger, Nigeria, and Mali, weapons are used for traditional ceremonies, as a ‘rite of passage’ from boy- to manhood, and as symbols of bravery (Umoh and Akpan, 2021, p. 548).

In times of conflict, ungoverned spaces are often associated with higher demand for illicit small arms as individuals and groups seek to protect themselves. Criminality and social and political instability have indeed driven civilians to procure arms for self-protection in states such as Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone (Wisotzki, 2022, p. 254). In several countries in the region, crimes appear to involve mostly craft firearms. In Benin, for example, most robberies on roads and in urban areas

have reportedly been carried out with locally manufactured weapons (Asoba and Glokpor, 2014, p. 77). In 2017, the Ghanaian interior minister, Ambrose Dery, also suggested that 90 per cent of firearms used in armed robbery in Ghana were craft weapons (Seidu, 2017), though the Survey has not analysed the underlying data. Periods of political turmoil, including during elections, may also lead to an increase in the production of craft firearms when interested parties place bulk orders for their followers (SLANSA, 2022, p. 9).

The causation between the price and availability of industrially made firearms and the demand for artisanal firearms remains largely unknown at present, but deserves to be studied more carefully. One of the few studies on craft weapons examining demand dynamics attributed a notable decrease in demand for craft weapons to the end of armed conflict or to growing poverty among the population (Berghezan, 2014, p. 12). The majority of producers interviewed for this study in Côte d’Ivoire stated that fluctuations in the price of industrial firearms do not impact the overall demand for craft firearms in the country because the craft firearms market involves different types of clients—primarily hunters (according to 23 respondents), followed by peasants or

farmers (11) and traders (2) (Berghezan, 2014, p. 12). Meanwhile, producers in Mali have attributed periods of increased demand for craft weapons to the high prices of factory-produced firearms.¹⁹

Inter-communal conflict, between farmers and herders for example, may also contribute to increased demand for craft weapons by these actors (Nowak and Gsell, 2018, p. 8). Over the past ten years, farmer–herder conflicts in West and Central Africa—triggered by crop damage caused by the passage of livestock—have taken on greater significance, particularly in Nigeria, central Mali, and northern Burkina Faso (Brottem, 2021). In Nigeria, where Conflict Armament Research (CAR) has referred to the conflict between pastoralist and agrarian communities as the ‘western Sahel’s deadliest armed conflict’, authorities have seized craft weapons in significant quantities (2020, p. 7).²⁰

The Dozos of Burkina Faso, northern Côte d’Ivoire, and south-eastern Mali are known for their hunting skills and rely on artisanal smooth-barrel hunting weapons. In times of conflict, however, they have also acquired industrial firearms with automatic or semi-automatic mechanisms (for example, to support the government in fighting against jihadists groups in Mali or, 2010–11,

Image 7 Artisanal break-action handgun, Guinea, 2019



Source: Small Arms Survey

Image 8 Artisanal break-action handgun, Nigeria, 2017



Source: Small Arms Survey

in response to the rebellion of Alassane Ouattara in Côte d'Ivoire).²¹ Dozos reportedly play a prominent part in the gunsmithing trade, taking an active role in the sale and manufacture of homemade weapons and the informal regulatory system that governs it (Côte d'Ivoire, 2017, p. 16).

Overall, the production of craft firearms is deeply embedded in West Africa's history. This has led many communities to accept and protect gunsmiths (Pokoo, Aning, and Jaye, 2014, p. 58). By and large, the formal regulation of craft weapons has faced challenges across the region due to the often illicit but permissive nature of their production, and producers have continued to find ways to evade requirements (Assanvo, 2017).

Normative frameworks for craft firearm production

Globally, craft firearm production accounts for a far smaller proportion of firearm production than their industrial counterparts (Berman, 2011, p. 1). International guidance related to the manufacture of arms therefore tends to focus on the industry and neglect the specific character of craft producers. In practice, craft firearm production is often subject to significant regulatory gaps. In some instances, craft firearms—whether handguns, shotguns, or hunting rifles—are regulated in the same way as their industrial counterparts. In other cases, due to the cultural and historical legitimacy of craft production, craft firearms—or at least specific types

of craft firearms—are treated as a stand-alone regulatory category or subcategory. This can present challenges for applying a consistent approach towards the regulation of craft production in the region. In light of the above, this section explores how international and regional regulatory frameworks take craft firearms into consideration, with a view to understanding how such provisions are reflected in national regulatory approaches.

International and regional instruments

Three global instruments are particularly relevant to the regulation of arms production:

- **The UN Firearms Protocol:** The Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime adopted in 2000 (UNGA, 2001a). It is the first legally binding international instrument that prohibits the illicit manufacturing and trafficking of firearms and their components and ammunition (UNODC, 2016, p. 4). Within the ECOWAS region, all member states except Gambia, Guinea, and Niger are party to the convention and its protocols.
- **The UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons:** The politically binding UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA) was adopted by consensus in June 2001 and refers to a broad set of measures that states can take to reduce the illicit trade and its harmful impacts (UNGA, 2001b). The PoA's policy toolkit has evolved considerably since its adoption, through a series of biannual meetings of states and review conferences.
- **The International Tracing Instrument:** The politically binding International Tracing Instrument (ITI) was established within the framework of the PoA to encourage the tracing of illicit small arms and light weapons through marking, record-keeping, and cooperation (UNGA, 2005).

While none of these three instruments explicitly mentions artisanal firearms

(see Annexe 2), their definitions are broad enough to imply that craft production falls under their scope. Because these agreements do not distinguish between industrial and artisanal production, however, provisions on licensing, marking, record-keeping, and enforcement measures do not offer guidance on the specificities of these two different types of production.

In West Africa, **the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials** is a legally binding instrument regulating various aspects of small arms and light weapons control such as transfer, manufacture, possession, disposal, and record-keeping in all 15 ECOWAS member states (ECOWAS, 2006). It succeeded the 1998 ECOWAS Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons, which intended to prohibit local firearm production, and therefore craft firearms (Berkol, 2007, p. 4). The moratorium's regulation on craft production was impossible to monitor and consequently challenging to enforce, particularly in places where the production of craft weapons is deeply entrenched in communal traditions and may be pushed further underground (Berkol, 2007, p. 4). The ECOWAS Convention, which came into force in 2009, currently provides for the regulation of craft small arms and light weapons in line with an overarching policy of reducing and/or limiting the production of arms (ECOWAS, 2006, art. 7(2)). Although the convention calls for the regulation of 'local production', in practice, it mainly concerns craft production given that, of the 15 member states, only Nigeria possesses an established small arms industry (Florquin, Lipott, and Wairagu, 2019, p. 29).²² While the convention covers key regulatory domains, such as its international counterparts, it does not distinguish between types of production. Nor does it address manufacturing safety standards, which may prove particularly relevant in a region where craft firearms are widespread (see Map 1).

National regulation and legislation

In line with the ECOWAS Convention, an increasing number of member states have opted to regulate the local manufacture, repair, and assembly of small arms (2006, ch. 3). This section reviews

the main small arms control legislative frameworks of ECOWAS member states, highlighting the main approaches used to control the local production of small arms, and, by implication, the production of craft firearms.

This review exclusively focuses on legal provisions related to the manufacture, repair, and assembly of firearms—including their parts and ammunition—as well as related criminal provisions. It does not consider provisions related to the possession of firearms. The section also draws on the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Model Law against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition (UNODC, 2011), as well as the ECOWAS Convention, to establish an analytical frame of reference.

General scope

Despite different national legal systems and legislative drafting practices, ECOWAS member states often include introductory provisions that set out the general scope of laws pertaining to arms control and provide key definitions. Although most member states regulate the manufacture of firearms and ammunition within their respective arms control regimes, Benin, Cape Verde, and Senegal do so through a specific decree (Benin, 2007; Cape Verde, 2013a, art.2.(2); Senegal, 1974). Benin's 2007 decree is notable as it focuses exclusively on artisanal weapons and includes their manufacture, sale, and possession. Aside from Benin, member states seeking to regulate the production of weapons and ammunition tend to adopt an indiscriminate approach that implicitly includes both industrial and artisanal production. Given the lack of industrial capacities for firearm production in the region, however, the provisions related to the manufacture of firearms and ammunition usually cover craft firearms by default, as mentioned previously. Nevertheless, although the terms 'artisanal', 'homemade', and 'handicraft' are sometimes used to describe certain types of firearms (Burkina Faso, 2021, art. 3; Mali, 2021, art. 4), only Benin and Cape Verde propose a legal definition in their legislative frameworks (Benin, 2007, art. 1; Cape Verde, 2013a, art. 3). The inclusion of craft firearms in other laws and decrees is often ad hoc. In addition, the absence of legislative definitions presents challenges in ensuring that these arms can be integrated

coherently into firearms classification systems,²³ and, by extension, comply with other legislative requirements.

In addition to the introductory provisions, member states' legislative frameworks for arms control systematically contain preventive measures aimed at regulating the manufacturing, marking, and record-keeping of firearms—including their parts, components, and ammunition—as well as penal provisions that derive from these measures.

Authorization

In terms of preventive measures, most national legislation requires that manufacturers be granted authorization to manufacture or repair firearms and ammunition, and that a competent authority be responsible for issuing the authorization. This authorization is usually obtained in two different ways, depending on the country: 1) by granting individuals or companies authorization to manufacture firearms or ammunition provided that they do so in accordance with a licence (such as that of an armorer, manufacturer, or gunsmith) issued by a designated licensing authority (Benin, 2007, art. 4; Liberia, 2016, arts. 1(8), 1(9)); or 2) by granting authorization at the discretion of the government, usually also via a designated authority (Côte d'Ivoire, 1999, art. 15; Ghana, 1972, s. 6). Despite including provisions on manufacturing licences in national legislation, the issuing of manufacturer's authorizations does not appear commonplace.²⁴

The scope of these different authorization systems varies between countries. Licences encompass a range of activities such as the manufacture, repair, and assembly of small arms, as well as a variety of products such as firearms, ammunition, and their components. The type of firearms manufactured or repaired is often tied to the national weapons classification system (Cape Verde, 2013a, art. 39; Guinea, 1996, art. 3; Mali, 2021, art. 5; Senegal, 1966, art. 4(8)). In a few instances, national laws do not specify the type of firearms that can be legally produced or repaired and state that the decision is made at the discretion of the licensing authority (Côte d'Ivoire, 1999, art. 19; Gambia, 1924, art. 19). The absence of a legal definition for craft firearms across the region, however, makes it difficult to integrate them into classification systems in a coherent and systematic manner.

Certain outdated and undefined terms inherited from colonial times are still applied in the arms control regimes of various West African states, generating a range of ambiguities. Terms such as ‘sophisticated weapons’, ‘unsophisticated weapons’, ‘smooth-bore weapons’, and ‘flintlock or piston rifle’, for example, are commonly found in classification systems (UNREC, 2010, p. 8). West African legislation also frequently uses the term ‘weapons of war’ to refer to weapons that are more lethal and commonly used by government forces. In many instances, licensing systems restrict the manufacture of ‘weapons of war’ more than weapons allowed on the civilian market. While evidence suggests that craft firearms can fall under any of those categories, awarding a licence for the manufacture of craft firearms—as in the 2007 Benin decree for instance—may be interpreted as authorization to produce all the above.

Conditions

Licences to produce or repair firearms are subject to conditions set out in the relevant legislation, except in certain circumstances where those conditions are at the discretion of the licensing authority (Ghana, 1972, s. 6). Standard conditions for acquiring a licence to produce or repair usually include the following requirements: a minimum age; a medical certificate; proof of national citizenship; the good standing of the commercial enterprise; and no criminal convictions. In some instances, these conditions require the applicant to undergo training on marking and record-keeping (Benin, 2007, art. 5); to take appropriate measures to ensure the security of firearms and ammunition at the time of manufacture (Cape Verde, 2013b, art. 2; Liberia, 2016, art. 1(10) (d); Senegal, 1974, art. 4; Sierra Leone, 2012, art. 9); and to provide evidence of their commitment to adhere to the marking requirements prescribed under the law (without specifying what constitutes ‘evidence of commitment’) (Sierra Leone, 2012, art. 22). In certain contexts, these conditions may generate additional barriers for small-scale producers as they assume that those applying for a producer licence have access to public services and infrastructure, such as medical facilities or training centres, which is not necessarily the case (SLANSA, 2022). Overall, there is limited data to measure the extent to which such provisions are implemented across the

ECOWAS region, and further research would be beneficial.

With a few exceptions, all member states’ national legislation requires manufactured and repaired firearms and ammunition to be marked—typically with the name of the manufacturer, the country or place of manufacture, and the serial number, although the specific marking methods are never specified. The most recent legislation, which follows ECOWAS requirements more closely, also includes provisions for the security marking²⁵ of parts and components (Burkina Faso, 2021, art. 8; Mali,

2021, art. 44; Sierra Leone, 2012, art. 25(b)), and encourages manufacturers to develop measures to prevent the removal or alteration of markings (Burkina Faso, 2021, art. 8; Mali, 2021, art. 44; Liberia, 2016, art. 1(54)(b)). Although capacities may vary according to the type of producers, marking requirements for factory-made firearms and those for artisanal firearms are treated similarly. In some circumstances, this may raise concerns regarding the feasibility or relevance of certain provisions (such as those on security marking) for the most rudimentary items.

Box 1 Compliance with national regulations in Sierra Leone

Although the national regulatory framework in Sierra Leone has evolved to reflect a better understanding of issues pertaining to the production of craft weapons, its implementation in practice continues to face challenges. The Arms and Ammunition Act of 2012 and the Arms and Ammunition Regulations of 2014 are the main texts regulating the manufacture, repair, possession, use, sale, and disposal of arms in Sierra Leone (Sierra Leone, 2012; 2014). The Act stipulates requirements for the manufacture and sale of small arms in Sierra Leone, while the 2014 Regulations outline the different types of licences.

The regulations refer to a ‘manufacturer’s licence’, a ‘gunsmith’s licence’, and a ‘local manufacturer’s licence’, but only include provisions for the first two. The ‘local manufacturer’s licence’, which is most relevant to this study, is mentioned only briefly in the section on licensing fees (Sierra Leone, 2014, p. 13). Meanwhile, the law does not specify whether the requirements for this type of licence should be the same as those for manufacturers (Sierra Leone, 2014, arts. 11, 12) or gunsmiths (arts. 13–15), resulting in legal uncertainty as to which process craft producers should follow. The law implies that gunsmiths are repairers rather than manufacturers, as it stipulates that ‘any person who wishes to repair small arms shall apply to the Registrar for a gunsmith’s licence’ (Sierra Leone, 2014, art. 13). Nevertheless, in practice the terms ‘gunsmith’ and ‘local producer’ are often used interchangeably. The significantly higher fees associated with the ‘manufacturer’s licence’ may suggest that this type of licence pertains to larger businesses, and the ‘gunsmith’s licence’ or ‘local manufacturer’s licence’ to artisanal production and small-scale repairs. Legally speaking, however, this remains open to interpretation. Ultimately, this example highlights the importance of defining terms to avoid legal ambiguities, and explicitly distinguishing between industrial national producers and independent craft producers.

Less than 30 per cent of craft producers who took part in the focus group discussions knew of the Sierra Leone National Commission on Small Arms (SLeNCSA) and 50 per cent were not aware of the Arms and Ammunitions Act of 2012 or the Arms and Ammunition Regulations of 2014. Despite a 2019 campaign by SLeNCSA and SLANSA to raise awareness of the national licensing system and identify obstacles that prevent blacksmiths from registering, a general lack of knowledge of the licensing system remains among craft producers. Consequently, most producers operate without a licence. The focus group discussions suggest that most craft weapons are not marked and those that are do not conform to national regulations. In certain areas—namely Karene (north-west) and Kenema (east)—producers tend to put their own initials on their products.

The study also suggests that, despite not being familiar with the content of the legislation pertaining to the production of craft firearms, craft producers are nonetheless aware of the illicit nature of their profession. For some of them, economic considerations supersede concerns about compliance with the regulatory framework; however, 80 per cent of the participants (40 out of 50) expressed a willingness to stop manufacturing craft weapons if alternative livelihoods offered a similar level of income. The remaining 20 per cent said they wished to continue the production of craft weapons, which they see as their vocation and a traditional practice that has been passed on from generation to generation. These 20 per cent also declared their willingness to comply with the national regulatory framework provided that the costs are affordable and the regulations not overly onerous.

About half of ECOWAS member states' legislation stipulates record-keeping requirements for manufacturers. Legislation typically includes requirements to provide information on manufactured and/or repaired firearms and ammunition and, in some instances, on the manufacturers themselves (Benin, 2007, art. 5; Burkina Faso, 2021, art. 21(c); Liberia, 2016, art. 1(12)). The following information is generally recorded for each manufactured and/or repaired item: the name of the manufacturer, the make, the model, the quantity, the serial number, and the calibre (Benin, 2007, art. 8; Cape Verde, 2013b, art. 43(3)). The duration of record-keeping obligations is specified in certain instances (Burkina Faso, 2021, art. 21; Cape Verde, 2013b, art. 43(6)). This duration varies between 20 and 50 years, and is generally in line with the ITI's requirement that manufacturing records be kept for at least 30 years (UNGA, 2005, art. 12). In situations where literacy among producers is low (SLANSA, 2022), compliance for record-keeping provisions may be particularly challenging.

Member states' legislation reflects the absence of provisions in the ECOWAS Convention that guarantee the safety of firearms, ammunition, and all related material, such as firearm proofing and safety tests. Although key informants interviewed as part of this study reported the occurrence of safety incidents related to the use of craft firearms, no legislation is currently known to provide for quality control measures in the subregion.

Penalties

Finally, the legislation of ECOWAS member states establishes a series of criminal offences to cover the failure to obtain authorization for the manufacture and repair of firearms and ammunition, and the failure to apply markings sufficient for tracing. Penalties tend to apply to three areas: the illicit manufacture of weapons and ammunition, which typically corresponds to manufacture or repair without a licence; the removal or alteration of markings; and the tampering of records. While the majority of member states provide for sanctions against the illicit manufacture of firearms and ammunition in their legislation, only around half of them impose specific sanctions for the removal or alteration of markings. Still fewer coun-

tries impose specific sanctions for the tampering of records.²⁶

Conclusion

The production of craft firearms is deeply embedded in West Africa's culture and history. While the cultural significance of craft firearms in the region has endured since the precolonial era, the supply of, and demand for, craft weapons has increased due to socio-economic and security dynamics across the region. Although craft weapons are still used for hunting, cattle protection, and ceremonial purposes, they are also increasingly employed in criminal activities and communal conflicts—mainly due to their affordability and accessibility. In some contexts, the increasing demand for small arms seems to have contributed to the development of a profitable market for craft firearm production and to a professionalization of the activity. As of mid-2023, craft production in West Africa includes various types of small arms, ranging from single-shot firearms crafted on a small scale to copies of industrial-grade weapons with semi-automatic and automatic operating systems.

Regulating craft production in the region has proven particularly challenging. The experience of the ECOWAS Moratorium, however, suggests that regulating—rather than prohibiting—the production of craft firearms is more conducive to achieving the right balance between, on the one hand, acknowledging the socio-economic context associated with artisanal production, which is deeply rooted in regional culture, and, on the other, preventing the proliferation of illicit firearms on the other.

One of the study's key findings is that, in general, legislative requirements in West Africa for licensing, marking, and record-keeping do not distinguish between industrial manufacturers and craft producers. Yet provisions are often tailored to standards for industrial manufacturers, which set high administrative and technical bars for craft producers. Costly licences likely further deter craft producers from complying with legislative requirements—especially as it appears these requirements are rarely enforced, and craft production is both highly profitable and culturally significant. As the Sierra Leone case shows, however, artisans who produce firearms primarily for

traditional reasons are willing to work with the government to ensure better compliance with national regulations.

Improving regulation will require responsiveness to not only the size, capacity, and financial scale of small arms craft producers, but also their evolving products. In Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria, for example, craft firearms are no longer exclusively rudimentary items. In several instances, their sophistication appears comparable to military-grade equipment. In this changing production landscape, the absence of legislative definitions prevents coherence with weapons classification systems, which are the foundation of all firearms regulation—whether artisanal or industrial. While production methods are important factors when considering craft firearms regulation, it is primarily the weapons' operating (firing) systems that determine their lethality, utility for different purposes, and even possible propensity for misuse. Regulatory approaches should therefore take into account these important differences.

To date, despite the prevalence of craft firearms in the subregion, their inclusion in laws and decrees is often ad hoc and subject to interpretation. In a region such as ECOWAS—where most arms production capacity comes from artisanal production—a better understanding of firearm types, producers, methods of production, their uses, and their users is required to develop a more responsive approach to craft production in the region. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

CAR Conflict Armament Research

ECOWAS Economic Community of West African States

ITI International Tracing Instrument

NATCOM National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons

NFP National focal point

PoA Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects

SLANSA Sierra Leone Action Network on Small Arms

SLeNCSA Sierra Leone National Commission on Small Arms

UN United Nations

Annexes

Annexes 1 and 2 can be consulted on the Small Arms Survey website.

- Annexe 1: List of regulations included in the legislative analysis
- Annexe 2: Manufacture-related provisions of relevant instruments

Notes

- 1 National Commissions (NATCOMs) interviewed for this study highlighted the growing need to address this type of production and proliferation. National action plans have also recognized the issue of artisanal firearms, and have sometimes included census and registration initiatives in their strategies from the outset (Ghana, 2010, pp. 12–13; Mali, n.d., pp. 7–8; Sierra Leone, 2011, p. 7); a recent 2022 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime study identified artisanal weapons as a major concern in the Sahel (Leggett et al., 2022, p. 7).
- 2 According to key informants, many single-shot craft firearms in sub-Saharan Africa are not designed to propel a projectile—and as such are not strictly speaking weapons—but are used instead exclusively for ceremonial purposes, such as weddings, funerals, and other public events.
- 3 It must be noted that in other parts of the African continent the affordability of industrially made firearms reduces the need for artisanal production (author interview with Georges Berghezan, expert on small arms and light weapons in sub-Saharan Africa, 6 May 2022).
- 4 Benin provided a completed questionnaire and took part in an interview.
- 5 For the purposes of this study, the authors use the terms ‘craft’, ‘artisanal’, ‘handmade’, and ‘homemade’ interchangeably.
- 6 Hays and Jenzen-Jones (2018) covers craft firearms worldwide, but interviews conducted for this project confirm that this observation also applies to West Africa.
- 7 The respondents who participated in this study generally referred to semi-automatic systems (self-loading action) rather than fully automatic firearms (that allow for continuous fire).
- 8 Author interview with the NATCOM of Mali, 26 April 2022.
- 9 Several of the interviews conducted support this finding. See also Berghezan (2014, p. 12) and Wisler (2021, pp. 84, 92).
- 10 Author interview with confidential sources, Bamako, April 2023.
- 11 A blacksmith is defined here as ‘a metal smith who creates objects from wrought iron or sheet by forging the metal using tools to hammer, bend and cut the iron into shape’ (Sierra Leone, 2017, p. 3).

- Not all blacksmiths produce guns but those who do may also be considered gunsmiths. The term ‘gunsmith’ may also refer to gun repairers only (Sierra Leone, 2014, art. 13).
- 12 While undertaking the desk research, the authors came across evidence of a woman’s involvement in blacksmithery only once, but with no confirmation of whether she also produces guns (SLANSA, 2017, p. 7).
 - 13 Author’s exchange with an arms producer, Bamako, 4 April 2023.
 - 14 Author’s exchange with Georges Berghezan, expert on small arms and light weapons in sub-Saharan Africa, 17 May 2022.
 - 15 Author interview with confidential sources, Bamako, April 2023.
 - 16 Estimates include factory-made and hand-made weapons, though their respective proportion cannot be established.
 - 17 The grouping of West African states is based on UNSD-designated African sub-regions, and therefore includes two non-ECOWAS states: Mauritania and Saint Helena (UNSD, n.d.).
 - 18 Anecdotal evidence can be found in reports such as Wisler (2021).
 - 19 Author interview with arms producers, Bamako, 4 April 2023.
 - 20 CAR field teams collected 4,895 artisanal weapons during 2017 and 2018 (CAR, 2020, p. 8).
 - 21 Author exchange with an expert on small arms and light weapons in sub-Saharan Africa, 17 May 2022.
 - 22 Both Mali and Nigeria have the capacity to produce small arms ammunition (Florquin, Lipott, and Wairagu, 2019, p. 29).
 - 23 National and international actors have acknowledged the need to develop classification systems to facilitate the regulation and investigation of firearms. Based on national preferences, different criteria are applied to classify small arms and light weapon, such as the level of lethality, structure, portability, action, or technical features (UNODC, n.d.).
 - 24 This observation is based on the interviews with and questionnaires completed by the NATCOMs, as well as discussions with other stakeholders.
 - 25 Security markings are made on component parts and are difficult to manipulate after the weapon’s manufacture. Falsifying them would render the weapon unusable.
 - 26 See, for example, Burkina Faso (2021, art. 118).

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The Small Arms Survey is a global centre of excellence whose mandate is to generate impartial, evidence-based, and policy-relevant knowledge on all aspects of small arms and armed violence. It is the principal international source of expertise, information, and analysis on small arms and armed violence issues, and acts as a resource for governments, policymakers, researchers, and civil society. It is located in Geneva, Switzerland, and is an associated programme of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. The Survey has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

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